



SUCCESS STORY

BEYOND SUBSISTENCE:

Catfish farming is a lucrative business for ex-MNLF combatants



"We started small but this is the beginning of something big for us. We have rice but now we also have fish which before was very scarce in our area. But above all we now have knowledge. My son and I are proud to have learned how to culture fish and I thank the GEM Program for making this possible."

Comdr. Tamson Antolin, Chairperson, Sitio Bulakan Multi-Purpose Cooperative Kibines, Carmen, North Cotabato Province, Mindanao

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After laying down his rifle and becoming a farmer six years ago, Omar Tacuken, a Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) Commander and the Chairman of Sebastian Irrigators Farmers Association (SIFA) in Carmen, North Cotabato Province could be found, on most days, driving a tractor loaded with rice to the local mill. Now, a new activity has been added to his daily routine—feeding catfish. SIFA's 43 members have stocked 2,700 square meters of ponds with catfish, and are regularly tending the ponds, and harvesting their product.

Further down the road in Barangay Kibines, MNLF Comdr. Tamson Antolin and 21 other members of the Sitio Bulakan Multi-Purpose Cooperative are doing the same in an 800 square meter pond stocked with 5,000 catfish fingerlings.

They are two of the 13 cooperative groups (with a total membership of about 350) in North Cotabato, Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat Provinces in Central Mindanao, which have been trained by USAID's Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program in catfish production technologies.

In their first effort, SIFA members harvested about 10 metric tons of catfish valued at Php 500,000 (\$9,260). SIFA's income of Php 90,000 (\$1,670) was used to build a shed for a rice mill and buy a "turtle" tiller. With their income, the cooperative in Barangay Kibines expanded its ponds and bought more fingerlings and feed.

Since November 2002, GEM has assisted over 3,000 rebels turned farmers to diversify into higher-value commodities, such as catfish, and move beyond subsistence farming. In April 2003, GEM's Targeted Commodity Expansion Program (TCEP) conducted a series of catfish production technology workshops to teach former combatants how to design, construct and prepare their ponds and to culture catfish.

TCEP also helped find buyers for their new product. A marketing agreement between the cooperatives and a hatchery operator/live catfish buyer in Kabakan, North Cotabato was negotiated. Prospects for growth look good. As the catfish farmers gain technical proficiency and expand the size and number their ponds, production is expected to reach 240 metric tons per year valued at about Php 14 Million (about \$260,000) with an annual net income of Php 6 Million (\$111,000) or an average added income of Php 18,000 (\$330) per participant.